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Waiting for Mary Jane: A Collection of Modern Appalachian Short Stories
in the Joycean Tradition

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Lorie Ann Wright
August 2002

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ABSTRACT

Waiting for Mary Jane: A Collection of Modern Appalachian Short Stories

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by

Lorie Ann Wright

This thesis consists of a collection of short stories stylistically reminiscent of the works of James Joyce yet with an Appalachian and feminist voice. Waiting for Mary Jane should appeal to readers interested in experimental styles as well as feminist and Appalachian literature. The protagonist of the collection is Mary Jane, a female from present day East Tennessee. The reader experiences her life from age three to thirty. The introduction to the collection explores the link between James Joyce, Appalachia, Feminist writing, and the short stories. Structurally and thematically the collection reflects the works of James Joyce by using the concept of epiphany and experimental styles evolving from Joyce's Ulysses. As Mary Jane ages she changes from a pre-teen who longs for male acceptance from all surrounding men, including her farmer father, to a grown woman whose mental well-being is far more important than her outward appearance.

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. SUMMERS	13
Summer of 1978: Pigs and Piss	13
Summer of 1979: Amy	17
Summer of 1986: Puppets for the Lord	22
3. THE PEOPLE WAITING	26
4. THE OBEDIENT MAN	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	71
VITA	72

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I had been writing for twelve years before my formal introduction to Joyce. James Joyce is a familiar, and somewhat dreaded, name to an English student. The mere mention of Joyce's Ulysses could make even the most dedicated literary student cringe. Personally, I couldn't see what James Joyce could do for me, a student of Appalachian literature and folk tales more than the typical academic literature of Europe. I was mistaken.

I finally met him in the early part of my graduate school career in a seminar in James Joyce. I had heard several comments about the difficulty of Joyce's writing and was thus starting the class with mixed emotions. The class began with Dubliners. After reading the first few stories, I realized that readability and time were no longer an issue. Joyce's concept of epiphany had captured me. In Stephen Hero the term "epiphany" is described as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (Cuddon 233). These frozen moments in time enthralled me as both the reader and a writer. I wanted to be Joyce and write the stories of the common people scratching out a living in my everyday world. I wanted to write about epiphanies and dare to write what happens after the epiphany is over.

As the class continued we read A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and then spent about two months going, chapter by chapter, through Ulysses. The universality of Joyce's world began to shine through the pages as I learned about Stephen and Joyce's entwined life. I wanted to share my epiphanies in a work of fiction. For me this was a matter of writing about my home and

my experiences. Since the start of my college career, dreams of becoming a new type of Appalachian writer invaded my mind. By combining some of Joyce's techniques and my own words, the dream would become reality. I wanted to write with a new, modern Appalachian voice based on the world I grew up in, not the dated, inaccurate, stereotyped images normally associated with this kind of regional writing. The coalmines and granny women of my parents' generation are not part of my Appalachian upbringing and not a part of my writing. My stories reflect the rural, but industrial and educated, influences of my childhood. Because I am an Appalachian, my loosely autobiographical stories are Appalachian.

I started Joyce-inspired, regional writing by determining what one event had changed me the most. What had I seen or done that fit in the category of epiphany? I instantly knew that I had to tell about Mrs. Fisher and what I imagined her life to be. Thus I started writing "The People Waiting," which becomes the middle story in my collection.

"The People Waiting" tells the story of one day, or more accurately one shift, in the life of Mary Jane, a hospital employee who helps families with loved ones in the intensive care unit. Mary Jane has just learned that she is expecting a baby and this thought intrudes into and influences each thought. Mary Jane, as a slightly autobiographical character, is the Stephen in my collection. She is my voice, altered in fiction.

Mary Jane starts her workday early, by six, and on this particular day she is distracted and in a fairly negative mood. She can't figure out how to tell her husband, of whom she isn't overly fond, that she is pregnant with their first child. Her thoughts are open to the reader as most of this

story is written in Joyce-inspired stream of consciousness. Her thoughts are concentrated on her pregnancy, her work, and the music playing in the car .¹

Stream of consciousness, or interior monologue, is defined as a literary device that “seeks to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind” (Cuddon 645). The term was originally used in the field of psychology but soon found life in the hands of early twentieth-century writers such as Joyce (Cuddon 645). Mary Jane’s thoughts are intrinsic to the reader because they intimately illustrate the growth of Mary Jane from adolescence to womanhood. She reveals herself as a Joycean female. She is kind on the outside, politely conforming to the rules of her society and the mandates of her job. She thinks about the baby and her recent past as she starts the slow transformation from individual to employee. Her worker self is automatic, almost mechanical. Through her thoughts the emotional void of the work is shown. Mary Jane the advocate drolls out speeches from memory to answer questions of distraught family members.

Mary Jane spends most of this shift working with Mrs. Fisher, an older lady whose husband is near death. Mrs. Fisher, who has been in the hospital with her husband for months, is one of the familiar faces that Mary Jane recognizes and from whom Mary Jane gathers strength. Mary Jane learns about love from this couple.

Mary Jane and Mrs. Fisher represent the kind of females common in Joyce’s writing. Both women are not what they appear to be. They have a public persona that thinly veils their true

¹ All song lyrics mention in “The People Waiting” are from the 1995 re-release of Jim Croce: Photographs and Memories by Atlantic Records.

identity. In a recent article on the dark mother motif in Joyce's works, Linda Rohrer Paige says:

She may appear, at first, a positive portrait, but the reader of Joyce's Dubliners soon discovers that there is something wrong with the mother—all mothers, whether they be real mothers or surrogates...their "goodness" most decidedly tainted, Dubliners' mothers often seem ineffectual or hardened, sometimes even wildly or sadly perverted.

Paige's words perfectly describe the two mothers presented in my story. Mary Jane is a mother able to turn emotions on and off like water from a spout. She wants to be seen as the perfect woman but can't even start her day without mentally cursing her husband. How can this Mary Jane be a good mother?

Mrs. Fisher also has an alternative side. In the waiting room she sits, physically and emotionally drained, waiting for her husband to die. She is publicly stoic but constantly seeks shelter in a dream world of hazy memories. She appears strong but actually is frightened of her future as a widow. When she recalls John's childhood she remembers him as her only child, but still a distant outsider in the marriage. She is mother second and wife first.

Mrs. Fisher and Mary Jane are competing images of women dealing with distinct and irreversible changes in their personal lives. Mrs. Fisher is terrified of being left alone while Mary Jane is scared of never being alone again. By the end of the story Mary Jane is able to overcome some of her fears by witnessing Mrs. Fisher's reaction to her husband's death. The story ends on a positive note, leaving the reader with Mary Jane preparing to tell her husband about the pregnancy.

Because "The People Waiting" was the first longer piece of fiction I wrote after discovering Joyce, it seems natural that I would experiment with style as well as theme. Inspired by Joyce's stream-of-consciousness voice, I tried to emulate the effect in the story. I wanted to create a

distinct, conflicted female voice. I also wanted to play with sound as Joyce did. When Mary Jane turns on the defrost in her car, her thoughts grow. They take on the sound of a defrost button being pushed on the dashboard panel.

William Snyder, Jr., in a 1998 article, discusses Joyce's use of sound and language to leave definite impressions on the reader. Snyder argues that Joyce's use of words goes back to primitive patterns of discourse. Words sound like the action or object they describe. Snyder goes on to say that the sounds represent and describe a particular character or mood in Joyce's works (24-27). In "The People Waiting," the inner thoughts of Mary Jane are so basic, so disorganized, that they take the sound-influenced, instinctual language of more primitive forms of communication. Mary Jane's thought patterns illustrate her personality and her attitude.

After creating Mary Jane in "The People Waiting," I felt discontented leaving her. I liked Mary Jane and wanted to see what happened to her after the baby. This thought drove me to write "The Obedient Man," the third story in my collection, which tells of the next step in Mary Jane's life. Mary Jane, now the mother of an active preschooler, loses her husband to complications from diabetes. She is forced, as his nearest relative, to make the decision to terminate his life. She decides to remove him from life support, an action that results not only in his death, but Mary Jane's depression. Mary Jane is afraid she made the decision for the wrong reasons. Her marriage was not successful and she would rather see her husband die than be forced to pretend to care for him. She knows that he would want to stay on life support yet she removes it. Her husband always does exactly what Mary Jane demands; thus he dies.

This is the part of the story that holds feminist appeal. Mary Jane suddenly stops being the dependant wife and becomes a woman in her own right. Her decision, this forced epiphany, is

made for personal and possibly selfish reasons. She goes against her husband's wishes and the wishes of her family to make her own life better. This is the moment where Mary Jane matures.

Mary Jane's feminist transition is not easy. The death-bed decision haunts her. She has to come to terms with her new life as a single mother and a woman alone. She doesn't miss her husband but has to take responsibility for her decision and all the decisions she will make in the future. This period of personal growth is frightening and leads to Mary Jane's depression. She must learn to trust in herself and her abilities before she can complete the transition. At the end of the story, a traumatic event forces Mary Jane to react and take on her new responsibility as a single mother and an independent woman.

I decided to put Mary Jane in such a tragic and impossible situation for two reasons. First, I wanted to go beyond the epiphany concept of Joyce's work and show the life-altering results of one decision made, one moment in time. Second, I wanted Mary Jane to experience death as did her emotional mentor, Mrs. Fisher. While Mary Jane's marriage is not as all consuming as Mrs. Fisher's, both women must find the courage to carry on.

As in all my stories, time is a tool in "The Obedient Man." The story takes place in a short period of time. Mary Jane waits for the call, picks up her daughter, and goes to the park all in about an hour. Time is relative as Mary Jane's memories fill in the past six months of her life.

Because the story takes place in a mere hour, certain minutes can be stretched into paragraphs of discontent. Mary Jane's depression settles in while she is on the park bench and she feels so bad that time seems to freeze. A mere moment lasts an emotional day.

I continue to play with time and the idea of epiphany in the first set of stories in my collection. "Summers" is a set of three shorter pieces that recreates Mary Jane's childhood. I was driven to write these pieces because I was losing the humanity of Mary Jane as a character. The

reader needs to see her as a child, an innocent, and to see what makes her unique. Where did she come from? What are her parents like? Was she selfish as a child? The reader needs to see the little girl who became Mary Jane.

When choosing the particular events to recreate for “Summers,” I looked again to Joyce for help. In Portrait, Stephen has been altered even as a small boy by his parents’ economic problems and his own fear of authority, especially the power of church and school figures. Stephen as a schoolboy sets the tone for Stephen as an adult. Joyce also sets the time and place of the story early in the work. His Ireland is not a happy place. He portrays a homeland that is dark, dingy, and industrial. Using Joyce’s pattern, I wanted to set the tone and place of Mary Jane’s youth.

For the location I had no choice but to use the only world I was familiar with—the rural farming land of upper east Tennessee. All the events take place in the three worlds of my rural childhood—the isolated farm, the church, and school. As a slightly autobiographical character, Mary Jane should share my background. My mother, the traditional strong Appalachian woman who puts family and church first, is Mary Jane’s mom. While her role in the story is understated, it is clear that she is the backbone of the family. My father, a farmer, trader, and a trickster, is the basis of Mary Jane’s dad. The siblings and other childhood characters are creations from a mix of friends, family members, and pure fiction.

The first of the short, memoir pieces, Summer of 1978: Pigs and Piss portrays the fear of a small child, uncomfortable and afraid in her own environment. The story simply tells of Mary Jane’s great fear of farm animals, especially pigs, and her distress at being female in her male-centered world. Mary Jane is only four years old at this time.

One of the motifs of this story is body fluid. Mary Jane is jealous of her brother's ability to urinate standing upright and sees this as an advantage over her squatting. Mary Jane even at four wants the control to pee where she chooses.

The second story of this collection—Summer of 1979: Amy—tells about the birth of Mary Jane's little sister and the immediate after effects in Mary Jane's life. This story portrays Mary Jane at five, slightly older, but still a fearful child. Instead of pigs, a new pair of animals has been introduced to be Mary Jane's nemesis.

This second piece establishes an identity for Mary Jane's father. He is an influential person in her life, and already we see her desperate need to please him. Dad is a farmer with little time to waste. He is an impatient man. He can't stay in the hospital to wait for the birth of his child. He is also an almost mythological hero to Mary Jane because it is his job to save her from danger. Tragically, he is also usually responsible for problems Mary Jane has to face, so his rescues are marred by other parenting mistakes.

In the third story—Summer of 1986: Puppets for the Lord—Mary Jane is almost thirteen and starting to explore her sexuality. She uses her only social outlet besides school to field this adventure. The story tells about Mary Jane's first kiss. She has matured over the past eight years and is now a pleasant, young teenager. She is also a schemer and is already learning to switch into various roles according to her situation. Donovan, her love interest, never sees the manipulative woman emerging. He believes he is in control of his once wayward life and of her. By the end of the story there is doubt as to who corrupts whom in this relationship. Seeing this early dating relationship helps the reader relate to Mary Jane's later marriage. She has always wanted to lead.

“Summers” has a different voice from the rest of the works in the thesis. I started writing the stories when not immersed in Joyce, so stylistically the stories are more traditional. These pieces are more innocent and more direct than the others in the thesis. I wanted to create short, instant impressions of Mary Jane the child.

The collection as a whole, including “Summers,” “The People Waiting,” and “The Obedient Man,” is titled Waiting for Mary Jane. As the story progresses through Mary Jane’s life, the reader should understand that something is going to happen to this woman to make her finally grow into a complete person. The reader gets to watch Mary Jane grow into her full name. She is unnamed as a child, given a job title in her twenties, and finally, at thirty, finds a way to claim her own identity.

My goal for the collection is to provide an honest portrayal of the scope of one woman’s life through a Joycean framework. I want to use the Joycean techniques that drew my interest as a reader. While my goal is never to emulate or directly copy any of Joyce’s ideas, I am interested in using the ideas of epiphany, dual identity, and stream of consciousness. Focusing on these three concepts has helped me create a new, distinctive voice for my stories.

As her creator, I want Mary Jane to be a character full of the flaws and fears that make up humanity and yet still have her thrive, or at least survive, by the end of her tale. I wanted her to be stronger than the fearful child she once was. The collection ends with the start of her new life as a survivor. Like Joyce’s Stephen, Mary Jane finds her direction with age.

CHAPTER 2

SUMMERS

Summer of 1978: Pigs and Piss

The hogs were busy that year making plans. They spent their days drooling gulps of saliva while obsessed with one beastly desire: They wanted to taste the tender flesh of a four-year-old girl with long brown braids and glasses. It was my deepest longing to survive the summer with all my limbs intact and to deny them their feast.

Each day I would wake knowing that I would face the hogs. Sometimes I would pass by the living room window on the way to breakfast and hear a snort. I knew that if I turned my gaze even just an inch I would see the huge slop-covered face of a hog straining against the pane of glass that separated his growling belly from me. I would run into the kitchen, screaming for Mom to chase the monster away. She would wipe her hands on a dishtowel and then walk to the window. The hog was always gone. He didn't want anyone else to suspect.

When I went outside I was cautious. The hogs were supposed to be kept in a pen about a quarter mile from the house, and the fence was sturdy, but nevertheless they routinely escaped their prison. I could be playing on my swing set, climbing up the ladder to the slide, and find myself surrounded. A lusty porcine grin would be at the foot of the slide, and his evil cohort and partner in crime awaited me at the bottom rung of the ladder. I would be trapped, or more accurately, treed like an animal. I would scream hoping that Mom or my brother would hear and decide to rescue me. Usually one of them did.

Often I would be lured into a trap as I played along the dirt road that led to the barns, strolling along, dragging a hula-hoop, or playing with a yo-yo. My legs would go limp.

Suddenly I would be flat on my back, lying fallow in the hog hole. The beasts would snort and paw until they wallowed out huge pits the size of a hog belly. A hog belly was also the size of a frightened and tasty girl child. I would open my mouth wide to call for help only to find myself assaulted by the odor of slop breath. Wet, slimy spit would drip onto my stomach as the hogs thought about eating me. My breath would finally return and I would yell so loud my throat would stretch. The hogs laughed. They thought it was their chance to have me for dinner. I just closed my eyes and waited for death or a savior.

Instead of a savior I would get a cowboy.

James Kenneth, my older brother would run out of the house, cane in hand, swinging wildly while yelling about the Alamo, and chase the hogs away. At eight, the boy was a smaller image of the man he would grow to be. Always the cowboy, a troublemaker and hero combined, he was aloof and lonely but willing to step into the mess and save the day. J.K., as he would later be called, was my protector and only companion because no other children lived near my family's farm. We were the best of friends as well as violent siblings ready to harass each other at every opportunity. My brother was an expert at bizarre forms of embarrassment and torture, and I was his constant victim.

J.K.'s favorite summer schemes involved two emotions, my humiliation and my jealousy. It was a well-known fact in the household that I wanted to pee like a man but couldn't for obvious gender reasons. My brother lorded his pissing powers over me, reminding me of his own manly success by pissing in all sorts of locations. I wanted that freedom.

If we were working with Dad in the barn and J. K. had to pee, then my dad just pointed to a spot along the fence and left him to do his business. My brother said that on a dry day he could make pictures in the dirt and even spell out his name.

If I had to pee while in the barn it wasn't so simple a procedure. My dad would sigh as soon as he heard my complaint. He had to stop work and walk or drive me down the long, winding road to the house. My kidneys consistently interrupted him.

We had tried it outside a couple of times, but Dad was repulsed by the concept of squatting. His disdain usually made me nervous and unable to release. Dad would wait a few minutes and then yell for J.K. to come help me. Embarrassed beyond imagination, I would quickly pull my panties and jeans to my middle and run with all my might to the house. J.K. would run after me because Dad ordered him to, though he rarely failed to gloat at my misery as soon as he caught up with me.

J.K.'s favorite torture was to make me pee in front of company. My dress clothes were always yellowed at the crotch from all his successful missions. He would chase me around the yard, onto the porch, into the house, and usually corner me beside the refrigerator. He knew I wouldn't yell for help and shame Mom in front of visitors, so he had free reign to do whatever he wished.

I was trapped. He was elated. He was also ready to tickle. He would aim under the armpits and continue the attack until I either quit breathing or peed. I could hear the company complimenting us as comments drifted in from the living room. I gasped for air. People were amazed that two siblings could play so well together. How lucky I was to have an older brother to keep me entertained and laughing.

Eventually I would feel the explosion that signaled J.K.'s triumph. The unrelieved pressure would build up accompanied by the pain and I would feel the breaking point. The crotch of my pink corduroy pants would darken as the urine flowed through the thin cotton of my underwear.

The spot would elongate as the fluid ran down my legs and into the knit ribbing of my white socks. Soon a puddle formed in the floor beneath me.

J.K. would laugh so hard that he couldn't make any sound. Silent, but with tears rolling from his eyes he would hold his sides and rock, open mouthed and shaking, until the quiet would urge Mom to check on us.

I would be rushed to the bathtub to wipe away the events of the day. Soft, clean washrags bubbling with soap would remove the pee, the dirt, the spit, the slobber, and shame. Mom would tuck me in a fresh made bed and now safe, I would sleep until the next attack.

J.K. would be forced to feed the pigs for the next week as punishment for shaming his little sister.

Summer of 1979: Amy

I really liked my little sister until she was about six months old. She had been useful for the first six months. In December of 1978 her anticipated birth had created a magical allure to Christmas. Family had come from Kentucky and Virginia for the holiday, unable to resist attending the birth of another Hopkins child. I, the youngest child, gained boon after boon from my zealous relations. I had over twenty packages that year from relatives afraid that I would be jealous of the new arrival. I was basking in the glow of the holiday season. J.K. had told me that the gifts would keep coming even after the new baby was born. Apparently when people bought gifts for the baby they also bought presents for the siblings. J. K. said that the toys at Christmas would look mean and stingy in comparison with the baby-guilt gifts that would soon come pouring in. Thus, I was overjoyed when Mammaw Hopkins shook me awake four days after Christmas to say that Mom was having the baby.

Mom had left for the hospital during the middle of the night, and Dad had gone with her. J.K. had assured me that this was the way birthing happened. Dads drove to the hospital and waited for the baby to be delivered. I was stunned by this news because I had never seen our father wait for anything. He wasn't a patient man, and I could only imagine how he complained at the hospital. Dad was well known at the Western Sizzling for commenting loudly and repeatedly for any delay in service. Dad was the kind of man who didn't like to wait for a steak, much less his own children, even a fresh one.

We were eating bologna gravy and toast when the call came. Mammaw picked up the phone and immediately frowned. Dad was not on the other end. A nurse from the maternity ward had the privilege off telling Mammaw that the last of her 23 grandchildren had been born. Mom had

a little girl, Amy Christine. Dad had missed the birth because he had wearied of waiting and gone to McDonald's for breakfast. I knew he wouldn't have waited that long for anything.

Mammaw told us the news and J.K. punched me hard on the arm and stormed out of the kitchen. As I stood rubbing my biceps, trying not to cry, I secretly rejoiced because I knew the tyranny would soon end. Mom had given me a little sister. That meant J.K. was out-numbered and he knew it.

The first six months of Amy's life was a dream. Each day different friends and family members came by to see the baby and to bring me presents. I felt like the toll booths that I had seen on TV. If people wanted to see the baby then they had to pay me in order to pass to her room. I received loads of merchandise and sometimes, usually from the male visitors, cold hard cash.

Amy was not that bad either. She mostly slept and ate, and I was allowed to hold her as long as Mom helped me. She didn't do much yet, but I was sure that would change as soon as she got bigger. I was looking forward to the day when she would be large enough to help me beat up J.K. Occasionally, once Amy started eating solid food, I was allowed to feed her. Mom always regretted letting me help because I tried to make Amy eat as much as possible. If Mom laid out half a jar of strained carrots, I would feed her the whole jar. If she didn't like the baby food, I would mush up my soup beans, or whatever I was eating, and feed her that instead. I wanted her to be huge. I figured she had to eat to grow. Mom figured I was trying to kill my baby sister who was often gassy or nauseous after I had surplused her dinner.

Amy stopped being fun at the beginning of June. She had suddenly become a disaster; a source of irritation in my life and most significantly the reason the Generals, J.K.'s evil dogs, were brought to the farm.

Apparently J.K. was not the only one feeling overpowered by the female aura of the household. Dad, who was still not completely forgiven for his impromptu jaunt to McDonald's, decided more male influence was needed in the home; thus he called in the professionals. The professionals were two Doberman pincher puppies who looked exactly alike. Dad claimed they were only three months old, but they were giants, a lumbering, but lean pair of males that disliked everyone except Dad and J.K. Dad thought that the dogs would make J.K. feel better since he was still suffering from the disappointment of not having a little brother. Dad failed to realize that the dogs, like most of the farm animals, would despise me and wish for nothing but my unfortunate death. Thus while J.K. called the dogs Blacky and Thor, I referred to them as the Generals because they attacked the enemy—me.

Dad tried to explain that the dogs could sense my fear and that was why they snapped at me. He told me not to be afraid and they would like me as much as J.K. I didn't believe it. I had seen their intelligent and malicious gazes. I knew they wanted me gone, to even up the odds. Amy was well supervised. They couldn't get to her. Mom helped J.K. feed them; they couldn't kill her. So I was the girl who had to go.

The worst and final attack happened at the end of July. I survived all the outdoor activities of Independence Day without losing a limb and had a play date with our next-door neighbor. I had let my guard down. I am sure they sensed my new security.

Mom had taken Amy to the doctor's office for her MMR shot, and Dad was supposed to be watching me. Mom had been gone about ten minutes when he went out to work in the upper barn and left me in J.K.'s care.

The Generals had planned a sneak attack. At first they played nicely with J.K. while I played on the swing. J.K. would throw sticks and they would chase them. I was safe until a stick landed

near me—so near me, in fact, that when the dogs came to fetch the stick, my dangling feet, coming down from a particularly high swing, struck one of the massive creatures on its lowered head. Suddenly the demon eyes were upon me. The accidental kick was seen as an act of aggression, and I found myself climbing, scurrying up the tree as fast as a squirrel in order to preserve my life.

I was shocked. Not only had I just found myself gifted with the power to practically fly up a tree, but I had also found my voice. My voice was loud. No longer the softly spoken girl, but a woman who at almost five was confronting death, I screamed with all my might. There was no need to imagine or pretend my death any longer. The long, white, foamy strands of saliva that landed on my bare legs as the dogs lurched farther and farther up the tree were real. I could feel the sharp teeth pulling at my shoes as the beasts grabbed at my soles. The animals had gone insane. I was filled with two emotions. First, was self-righteous anger because I was right—the dogs did want to kill me. Secondly, I was scared because J.K. was not running to my rescue but running the opposite direction toward the upper barn, apparently laughing.

I screamed for Dad.

I stopped screaming when the retort of the shotgun echoed through the air. Suddenly the dogs were running as fast as they could away from me and away from Dad, who had gotten the shotgun out of the truck and unloaded it at them.

It took me ten minutes to find a way down the tree.

We never told Mom what happened to the dogs.

Dad took us out to eat that night. He didn't yell at me for not eating all my steak. He didn't complain to the waiter about slow service; he even let us order dessert. As it turns out, Dad had snuck off to the barn that day, when he was supposed to be watching us, and had found two

sheep torn to bits by the Generals. He was loading his gun when he saw, then heard, J.K. His oldest son, a big boy, soon to turn ten, was crying so hard he couldn't breathe. He had ran all the way up the hill. His crying had almost sounded like laughter.

Dad had started firing before he got both feet out of the truck and onto the ground.

He told me about the sheep while fishing on a Sunday afternoon when I was about seventeen years old. He might not wait for his own child to be delivered, but still I was glad my Dad was not a patient man.

Summer of 1986: Puppets for the Lord

Donovan was not overly religious, but that summer the whole church thought he was a saint. They were amazed at the wonderful transformation of this wayward son. He was the preacher's grandson and had been a wild man until the Lord called him into the fold. He was no longer the dangerous seventeen-year-old who crashed cars and drank at cowboy bars. Now he was an active member (one of eight names on the full roster) of the New Hope Missionary Baptist Youth Service Organization, and I just happened to be the secretary. At almost thirteen, that was enough coincidence to create the illusion of destiny. Thus my goal for the summer was to make him fall in love with me.

I began my mission early. On Easter morning I went to the sunrise service hoping he would be there to notice me. I had dressed carefully, waking up at four o'clock in the morning to create the perfect mystical, spiritual, and sensual outfit. The purple paisley sundress was new and had a bohemian flavor. My sandals were old, from the previous summer, but the straps were thin and crisscrossed up my calf attracting the eye up into more mysterious regions. My hat was straw with a matching purple ribbon. I was a firm believer in hats as tools of seduction—they automatically draw attention. I didn't bother with a purse; purses reminded men of their moms. One large pocket book or tote bag could be the death knell of a budding romance. Men do not talk dirty to their mothers.

The Easter Sunday Starting Seduction plan was a success. Not only did my man notice me, he actually talked to me for twenty minutes. Apparently he was in the same agriculture class as J.K., and he had heard my name and wondered if we were related. I was excited because he obviously had to ask someone my name to know who I was, and that proved that our relationship was meant to be. The pagan fates were weaving in the local Baptist congregation.

My part in the conversation left something to be desired. After realizing that he had indeed noticed me, I became horribly embarrassed and started rambling. He asked why J.K didn't attend church with us, and I started making a mile long list of excuses, stuttering as I tried to explain that he worked with Dad on the farm, even on Sunday, and that they worshiped in their own way like John Walton. I ended the conversation by detailing the Christian benefits of watching wholesome family TV programs like *Little House* and, of course, *The Walton's*. He just laughed and said he would see me in a few hours. I was weak with anticipation. That morning at the regular eleven o'clock service he asked two other people to scoot over so he could sit by me. It was the beginning I hoped for.

By June we were the unofficial couple of the youth group. The preacher, who was also our supervisor and chaperone on all youth group activities, thought this was wonderful. He believed I was the perfect Christian young lady and thus a good influence on his recently converted grandson. He had no idea that I actually had a torrid relationship with the Lord and often used my religious powers to reach my own selfish ends. Me and Jesus had our own thing going, and this summer it was all about curiosity and kissing.

Each night I would go to bed and pray until I fell asleep. I would pray that God would grant me the opportunity to be alone with Donovan long enough to receive my first real kiss. A real kiss was defined as a mouth-to-mouth kiss involving tongue. I had a few practice kisses earlier in the year but now I was craving more. I told God that I truly, really believed in him and that I claimed the power that only faith could bring. I didn't want to move the mountain with my mustard seed; I just wanted a few minutes of privacy, Lord. I finally fell asleep offering various scenes and settings that God could create for my magical moment.

God decided to answer my prayers through the puppet ministry and Sister Bonnie Sinclair. Sister Bonnie was the wife of a traveling evangelist who preached during revival at our church every year. This year Sister Bonnie would be staying at our church after revival was over to help our youth group establish a puppet ministry. This meant I had more time to spend with Donovan.

So every Tuesday and Thursday night, from six to eight, we would gather in the meeting hall and practice. Sister Bonnie would sit in front of the puppet stage (a huge, monstrous thing made from plumbing pipes and thick black cloth) and watch us rehearse the skits she wrote. She loved to put Donovan and me into the same scenes because we puppeted so well together (destiny was at work once again). He would stand close to me while we would practice behind the curtain, and I would get nervous and forget my lines. Grinning, he would kiss the back of my neck, and I would lose all train of thought until Sister Bonnie's voice would find me.

We finally had the chance to be alone during the last practice of July. We were having an extended session before the first real performance the next Sunday, and Sister Bonnie wanted to be perfect. The puppeteers were all hot and hungry. The church had no air conditioning, only high ceiling fans that stirred up the heat more than they cooled. I had been practicing the same scene for about twenty minutes when finally Sister said we could take a break. My throat was dried up from making high-pitched puppet voices, so I ran for the water fountain while everyone else went outside to get soft drinks and snacks from Sister Bonnie.

I pushed the metal button and watched the cool stream flow from spout. After several long drinks my thirst was quenched and I turned around only to find him standing there waiting for me. Before I knew what was happening, his hands were on my face drawing me closer. Suddenly my eyes were closed and we were kissing. My arms went around his shoulders for

sheer support and he tightened his hold on me as he continued the kiss. Wet and filled with tongues, the kiss went on forever.

Suddenly a familiar voice crept into my consciousness. Sister Bonnie was coming down the hall and would be at turning the corner any minute. She was talking animatedly with another puppeteer. Donovan and I broke apart. I was red all over and he was grinning. I shivered and then nervously turned the corner to get away from Sister. I couldn't help but to look back at him one more time as I walked. Truly the Lord understood me and wanted us to be together.

While I was walking and staring at him I walked directly into the huge framed picture of Jesus on the cross that hung in the hall way and practically rendered myself unconscious. He, Donovan, not Jesus, bent double laughing as I held onto the wall and watched bright blue and yellow lights flash in my eyes. Sister Bonnie never suspected a thing. She was distracted by the knot rising rapidly across my forehead.

Donovan and I dated through the fall, stealing moments between the services, in the back hallways of the church, to continue working on that first kiss. The kissing lasted until the allure of sin became too much for him, and he had to spend a few days drinking and getting high with old buddies at the lake. His parents, disappointed and following the advice of his grandfather, sent him to military school to finish the school year.

He wrote me a few times during that year and I wrote back once. I had talked to God about it, and we both agreed that fate was a fickle pagan concept and that I had more sinning to do before my destiny would lead to marriage. The wages of sin might be death, but I was saved and God liked me so I was ready to have a good time and ask pardon later.

My summer mission was successful.

CHAPTER 3
THE PEOPLE WAITING

6:15 am

Key in the Lock. Key in the Lock. Cold. Cold. Cold. Defffffrooooooosstttt ooonnnnn high. Heat. Heat. Heat. Shhhiiiiit! Where in the hell did he put it? I should not have to be out in this cold ass weather.

Okkaaay. Shake well. Hold nozzle six to eight inches from surface area. Spray frosted area thoroughly while continuing to defrost. Ice should melt instantly.

Good enough.

Aaugh.....heat, heat, heat.

Seat belt in place. Emergency brake off. Ready to go, Captain. Time? 6:21am. Five minutes to the four-way stop. Ten minutes on the highway. Ten minutes on State of Franklin. Five minutes to park. At the clock with two whole minutes to spare.

Choices for today, listeners, include Carol King's Tapestry, Bonnie Raitt, mixed tape filled with Amy crap, Violent Femmes, New Hope Youth Choir. Songs of Hope and Glory. William Music. William Music. Skulls, Skeletons. Dead babies. What the hell . . .

Okaay. Jim Croce it is.

"One less set of footsteps on your floor"

I need to call Mr. Giles and tell him. He should give me a discount since I never got to use mine all the years I worked there. Perfections are such good shoes. Flexible yet still supportive. Machine washable. Extra laces—just in case.

“What does your husband think? Is he excited about it?

“Actually I haven’t told William yet—I am waiting for the right time.”

“He wants a family doesn’t he?”

Sure, every man wants to plant his seed deep and lowdown and breed the hell out of some poor female. Every man wants to go on forever—his blood to continue generation after generation. Little copies of him and me running stark naked through the living room raising thin arms in defiance of bed time. Big Brown eyes, dark hair, my skin, his lips. She’ll look Italian.

Daddy. Daddy. Daddy. Da Da.

Ta da!!

Tonight. Tonight after work. He can tuck me in and I’ll just say it. No sneaky surprises, just the words straight from my mouth to his ears. No joking, no denying it. He’ll be ecstatic. He loves animals. He loves all cats and dogs. He even likes birds.

Come on old bastard get a move on. The light is green.

“Or maybe a super God”

On schedule, Captain. 6:27am. Defrost off. Heat on. Maybe too hot. Heat on low.

He will be happy and he will want to tell them as soon as possible. He will probably call.

“Guess what?”

“Remember what you were asking us about last week?”

“Well, we’re not getting the Basset Hound.”

They will look at me like the Virgin Mary. Miracle Me. They will smile all the time and I will squirm each time we go over there. They will watch what I eat when we go to restaurants. She will ask about my milk intake.

I don’t eat.

I intake.

I should eat breakfast in the mornings. I hate eating in the mornings. Nasty egg shells clinking in the sink drainer at five a.m. The smell of fried butter lying thick in the skillet coagulating. Cleaning the whipped eggs off the plate when I get home. Dried plastic Cold eggs. Dead chickens never given a chance to grow.

The only good chicken is a dead chicken.

“The sacrifice you have made ma’am, is an honorable one. Know your child died for a worthy cause. He was a source of protein. Pure protein, ma’am. Nourishment for the future of this proud nation. ”

God, I hate eggs.

That is all he ever ate. I bet I have fixed him a million and two fried eggs. Fried before marriage scrambled after. Three a.m. and I was frying eggs while he picked up the living room and pulled down the futon.

On the futon. Just relaxing. Laid back, flat on my back. Cool concrete walls and incense. French vanilla and blackberry. Wafting smoke creating creatures, ghosts, like in a Disney movie. Winnie the Pooh and the Hufflepuffs on the walls dancing as the honey bees go by. I am just a little black rain cloud.

I hope she likes to read. I can see him curling up on the sofa and reading Lovecraft to her. Little ears hearing big words that have no real meaning, just tones that tell the story. Tones and one voice. Da Da.

I like my first idea. I will write him a letter. Just a note explaining the circumstances. A belated anniversary present. Just a few days late. I am just a few days late.

Dear Husband-O-Mine,

I love you very much so I wanted to give you something wonderful for an anniversary present. Please go into the bathroom for your surprises. You will find three pregnancy tests on the edge of the tub. Please notice the plus signs. Happy Anniversary!!

The card should be really nice. Manly, yet gentle. Loving. Not just about fucking. A fatherly card.

Must go to the gift shop on break and see what they have. Rozella has some nice stuff. She should have a card for the occasion.

“Hey, Rozella, how are you doing today?”

“Fine. And you?”

“ So-so, I guess. Just killing time before I have to go back up.”

“Are you looking for anything in particular? We got some new beanies in.”

“Actually, do you have a card that will tell my husband I am having a baby—it should also be an anniversary card. Nothing too lovey-dovey, just straight forward and to the point.”

“I got just the one in the back—I’ll get it for you.”

Maybe I should ask Mrs. Fisher what she thinks. She had a kid with 2106 and she had to tell him somehow.

God, I hope there is just one this time. I need one at a time. Two are too many. One is fine. I might suck at this. One is good, one is enough.

One . One. One. Uno, Dos, Tres. Quatro, Cinco, Sies.

Single. Singles. Five ones for a five, four quarters for a dollar. I need to make a call. Better take a nickel and dime, too.

“Operator, won’t you help me make this call.”

This is the longest freaking light in Johnson City. I can do my entire makeup routine while I wait at this light. Turn Green. Turn Green. Green. Green. Grrrrreeenn. Grreen.

Finally.

I think we should go to Outback tonight. Big glasses of iced tea and coconut shrimp. No beer for me, thanks anyway. I do not consume alcoholic beverages. The surgeon general has found that drinking alcohol while pregnant or nursing can cause potential health problems for the unborn fetus or nursing child. Onion soup instead. Walkabout soup. Thick strands of cheese and onion in light brown liquid. A poultice for me soul.

It will cure what is ailing you.

Warm and inviting. Slightly foreign. Sip by sip spoon my cares away. Brown bread with bad butter and a mug of healing soup warm in my cold hands. Yummy.

Yummy, yummy, tummy, tummy, Mommy, Mama, Mom, Mother.

Breakfast in bed in May. Warm, wrapped tight in quilts. Hearing voices below and pretending to be asleep with a smile on my face. Burnt toast and runny eggs served on a silver tray by tiny pink hands.

I hate eggs.

Time? Good to go, Captain. 6:44 a.m. Still two minutes to spare.

Exccellaaant.

Who is on third today? Christy. Christy, Christy, Christy. She'll have everything ready. Coffee Fresh? Check. Linens removed to dirty hold? Check. Papers in order? Check.

How was it in the ER? Bad, always crazy bad. Blah, Blah. Complain. Complain. Complain. Always in order, always in a foul mood.. Dependable Christy. Can set a watch by her.

Time? 6:46 a.m. Arrival at hospital three minutes, Captain. It's a Saturday. Parking looks good.

Front spaces available in employee lot. No suits today. Skeleton crew only, Captain.

A crew. My crew. Walking down the street holding hands. The mother hen and her chicks. Adorable dresses made alike. A mother-daughter combo. Peter Pan Collars and pleats. Ironing boards out early on Sundays pressing creases clean.

Starched and upright. Holding tight to the words to keep the meaning from getting in. Last song finally sung. Shake hands and off to eat.

I could tell all at once. I could tell him and them. A family gathering for an important announcement. After grace and before drink refills. I could stop the conversations.

“The market isn’t as good this time of the year—feed prices are too high. Everyone is selling.”

“Could you please pass the butter?”

“I love potato salad.”

“Mom, these rolls are delicious”

“Why didn’t you like the movie? I thought the makeup was great.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“May I have you attention please? I have an introduction to make.”

A name. Something strong, not too girly. Not lesbian. Not Mom. Not Emily. Never Melissa. Not a family name. Not a curse. Not a blessing. Not a ghost to live up to. A name to grow into. Tested and tried. Worthy. Something old.

Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

That was the worst hotel I have ever stayed in. How could we have stayed at such a hell hole?

Neon lights illustrating our actions at 2:00 a.m. Ruby Jewels LIVE!!! Flashing on and off, on and off, on and off his back as he breathed into me.

“Congratulations!”

“We’re so proud of you.”

“All grown up and married. Soon you’ll have two kids and a rabbit.”

Kim told me what people those people were like. Rabbits. Breeders. Going on and up and down. Never stopping. Fucking and birthing. Fucking and birthing. Fucking and birthing. Something there they can’t resist.

No more for me, thanks. I filled up already.

Time? 6:50 am. Parking lot is good to go, Captain. Front space available to your left. Easy landing expected, sir.

Car in park. Emergency brake on. Lights off. Radio off. Heat off.

Tote bag? Check.

Wallet in Tote? Check.

Makeup kit? Check.

Mints? Check.

Badge? Check.

Random reading material? Check.

Keys in pocketbook? Check.

Coat. Coat. Coat. Cold. Cold. Cold.

Key in the lock. Key in the lock.

Locked. Locked.

Locked. Locked.

Mrs. Fisher had steel grey hair clipped short and neat. Her black eyes snapped with intelligence as she nodded to the new worker coming into the waiting room. The young girl had stood at the door for a full minute and observed the scene before her. Bodies lie propped up at curious angles in the sections of uncomfortable chairs. Coffee cups sit empty and abandoned on yesterday's news. Magazines at least six months old thrown here and there. Tired eyes strain to see if there is caffeine in the pot. Yellow trash bags of used blankets and pillows piled high by the second door. Coffee is fresh and the smell mixes with the not-recently-brushed teeth and the thick bodies of those who spent the night in the waiting room. Mrs. Fisher can see the list of chores forming in Mary Jane's mind.

It was still a little early for the new advocate to be coming on shift but this one was always either early or late. She was never right on time like the rest of them. Mary Jane Sizemore, Family Advocate. This one didn't stand at the clock waiting for the perfect time. Clocking in too early resulted in overtime and a write up by the coordinator. Clocking in one minute later than the perfect time meant not getting paid for one extra minute of labor. So at seven minutes till, a mass of scrubs stood in line quickly swiping in and out, in and out. Paid one minute and free the next.

Mrs. Fisher never saw Mary Jane stand in that line.

Mrs. Fisher was on week eight. She was now officially in a "long haul" situation. The advocates, even the inept ones, knew her name and number. Zane Fisher, wife of William, DNR in 2106. "Out of Towners" who need extra care. Bad case. Too bad to be kept on the Critical list. "The urgency of labeling a patient critical is not needed in your husband's situation. We compare each patient with only one rule—reaching the best level of health attainable to him. There is no

need to continue to list Mr. Fisher as Critical. He is the same no matter what condition he is under.”

Mrs. Fisher knew what the nurse meant. Give up now and it will hurt less later. Critical makes everything too emotional. He is serious now. Slow. Steady and stable. A rock of Gibraltar through all these years. A sensitive man. An artist who paints with his whole hand and heart. Spreading his paint too thin. His lean hands reaching out to her, touching the curl in her hair. Giving more than he could afford. Giving up years of living for life. He is now serious and stable, nothing more.

“We can go ahead and get you a room out of the unit. We can put you in Adult Special Care. There are no visitation restrictions. Friends and family can come and go as much as they like. You can be with him all the time. If something should change, if you should need us, we will be right down the hall.”

She really meant it in a good way. He can die here, slowly, without you by his side for most of the time, or he can die with you. Hold his hand or not—it’s up to you.

We need the bed for someone with a hope, a chance, a prayer. Not Bill Fisher.

Mrs. Fisher put down her reading and went to the office door, “Could you tell me how William Fisher is listed this morning?”

Mary Jane turned away from the conversation with third shift advocate and grinned at the familiar voice, “Hey, Mrs. Fisher. How are you doing this morning?”

“Well, enough. I was just wanting to check on Bill. Did he rest well last night?”

“Let me see what I have down. Christy was just telling me what went on last night. Seemed to be pretty rough down in the ED, but it was calm up here. Let’s see, 2106—looks like he is just listed serious and the nurses say he rested well.”

Mrs. Fisher looked tired as she said, “Good, I want him to be rested well for the big move today.”

“Well, he isn’t on the list to move out yet, but they probably haven’t got the official paperwork finished either. All of his doctors have to sign off on it and that can take a while.” Mary Jane flipped the papers on her clipboard a few times making sure she didn’t miss anything. You can’t mess up with a Mrs. Fisher. They will catch you on the smallest mistake. She likes you, befriends you, and loves to catch you. Not mean, just bored. Sitting still too long with nothing to do but hear. Me and the ringing phones. That’s all that separates the day. Every two hours a visit and then back to me. Ring, ring . . . phones crying in unison.

“No, I don’t see anything about it yet, but I will let you know as soon as they give me word. I should be getting some room numbers in a little bit.”

Mrs. Fisher walked out of the tiny office. She knew the two girls were anxious to be rid of her for a few more minutes. They were doing shift change. Christy was telling who did what last night, and Mary Jane was listening and making notes.

Mrs. Fisher stared in the office as she thought of the young girl. That same weekend, last Saturday, Mary Jane had taken her down the hall. Down the hall to the meditation room. It was a small room with a leather couch and a few folding chairs. A waste paper basket and a box of tissues were the only decorations. A hospital courtesy phone was by the door.

Mary Jane had come to her hard seat in the waiting room, sat down by her, and said, “Dr. Sloan just called and he wants to talk with you. I’ll take you back whenever you’re ready.”

Mrs. Fisher had thought she was going to the ICU room. She had seen the big, locked metal doors and stopped in front of them. Mary Jane had looked up from the clipboard and into her eyes.

“No, Mrs. Fisher, He wants to talk with you in the quiet room. It’s more private.”

Private always means bad news in a hospital. If anything sounds pleasant and calm and like it might be nice, then beware. All the bad news is covered up in long words and tranquil locations. The metal doors seemed friendly in comparison to the stark room made for tears.

Mary Jane fumbled for the right key once they reached the door. Her hands turned the knob slowly and firmly as she tried key after key after key. Finally the fit was made and the door slung open.

“I’ll let the nurse know you’re here so she can tell Dr. Sloan. It shouldn’t be just a minute and he’ll be out to speak with you.”

Mrs. Fisher nodded as she put her bag down on the floor beside the couch. Her thoughts passed through her mind like useless, ceaseless prayers. Just a minute and you’ll know. He will tell you the results. The final word—the best they can do.

It will not be enough. They have all tried but he is too far gone. Too many illnesses working against each other. Get one going and then the other goes. Kidneys look good, but heart is bad. Vascular looks promising and the potassium’s off. A vicious cycle. A vicious cycle.

Those were the only words Mrs. Fisher remembered from that conversation. Dr. Sloan explained in his everyday voice that Bill was going to die no matter what they did. The only words she could distinctly recall were “a vicious cycle.”

Bill had once done a portrait of Dr. Hill. Dr. Hill had been with them forever. He had told her she was expecting when she had John and had told Bill about each of his health problems as they occurred. Blood pressure, diabetes, heart, and kidneys. He had started out as a young know-it-all. Mrs. Fisher hadn’t liked him much the first time she went to his office. Young, clean-cut, and educated. Age had done him a world of good. Life made him look a little older

than what he was. At fifty he looked sixty and that was just right for a doctor. Bill's painting was honest. It showed the wrinkles on his forehead and the spots on his hand. Too much coffee and calls at midnights from patients in the Emergency Room. A tired, good man was on that canvas. Bill had caught that worn, proud man.

Mrs. Fisher knew Dr. Sloan would be like Dr. Hill but not for twenty years or so.

Mrs. Fisher looked around the waiting room and was glad she was there. Any place was better than the meditation room. She was used to the mess, the smell, and the people who did the waiting. She had reinforcements here. A dozen people trapped like her in a limbo of waiting. She knew it was better for them to be together like this. The herd was comforting.

Mary Jane stood in the doorway mentally linking names with faces. Thank whoever that Christy is gone. Now I can do my job. Mrs. Welch? Over by the corner phone. Mr. Standish? Must be downstairs having his bacon and eggs. The Simpsons? Still asleep on third floor according to Christy. The J. Jones family? Hampton Inn Room 213. Mrs. Fisher? Here. Mrs. Reed? At mother-in-law's house until 10:30 visit, spending time with the new baby and little Donald. Still trying to breast feed through all this. Must be hard. So clinched for time, for husband, for family, for food. Momma , mother , and wife.

The open heart family still hasn't shown up. Probably in the old room . . . 2518.

"Could you please page the family of Jerry Collins to the ICU waiting room on Second?"

Loud as you can . . . no one can hear in the cafeteria.

"Thanks, Sue."

I ammm BUUUUUSSSSYYY

"No, it isn't too bad today. Knock on wood."

Hard . . . three times

“See you, later. I’ll call down before I go to lunch.”

Who else do I need?

The crani will not be here until later and that is all the surgeries we should get up here.

Need to check caths.

Need to . . . I hate this phone.

“ICU waiting. This is Mary Jane, Family Advocate. How can I help you?”

Hummm . . . hummmm . . .

“Hold on just a minute ma’am and I’ll check for you.”

Turn the page . . . here he is

“Are you a family member of Mr. Cox?”

Of course . . .

“Well, yes, I think that a favorite aunt would count as family. I have him listed in just serious condition today and the nurse said he rested well last night.”

Get ready . . . here it comes . . .

“I’m sorry, but that is all the information I can give you over the phone due to patient confidentiality.”

Blah, complain

“Yes, I know who you are, but that is all we can give anyone over the phone.”

Now the question . . . no, no, no

“No, I’m sorry but the nurses are busy with the patients at this time so I can’t ring you to them.”

Always busy . . . too busy to talk.

“Actually ma’am they would not be able to tell you anything else anyway. They have the same limitations that I do. Can I leave a message for the family to call you when they come in?”

Paper. Pen. Write. Repeat

“Okay, let me read that back to you. Please call Aunt Martha at 555-4454. She wants to know how Mack is today. You are in her prayers. Is that right? ”

Correct? Of course.

Always right never wrong.

“Okay, I’ll give it to them. Thanks. Bye-bye.”

I hate these phones.

Can’t wait till Carolyn gets here.

Volunteers love the phones.

May I have your attention, please? The medical and surgical intensive care will now receive visitors until 8:45 am. Please limit visitation to two family members at a time. Thank you.

Time to go.

Time to go.

Get along little doggies.

Follow the herd to the unit . . . don’t need directions from me.

Follow the mob.

“M. I. C. U. on the left. S. I. C. U. on the right.” Mary Jane said with a smile,

“Just read the signs. You won’t miss it, sir.”

Don’t have to ask me.

I have a volunteer.

Make her feel good. Ask Carolyn.

She gets up every Saturday for free.

No charge.

Not a nickel to call her own.

Saving souls through the ministry.

No cost but her time and you can have the knowledge .

All you have to do is ask her.

Not me. Not me. Knot me double.

Tied. Twisted.

Turned inside out and waiting for the right time to tell.

Big suits in baggy shirts with hair put back in a pony tail.

Pig tails on a busy Monday morning. No time to braid. Late. Late

Always late.

“Carolyn, I am going down to the cafeteria while everyone has gone back to visit. I’ll be back in ten. Page me if you need me.”

I love volunteers. Not paid for all they do.

For my job, they don’t get paid.

Make coffee.

Take calls.

Relay messages.

Race. Race. Race.

Run till we win the battle

Just about 300 days.

Already 21 down.

Only 279 left to go and she will be here.

That is plenty of time to tell.

To be ready.

To be me.

To be free.

Midnight movies with my old friends. Late nights at Gatsby's throwing bad darts. Two a.m. at home. Relaxing in a hot bath filled with bubbles, shiny green glass bottle in one hand and time in the other.

All for me.

All for me.

Selfish, greedy.

Me. Me. Meeeeee.

Inside me.

Is she.

Is she growing? Red and pulsing. A tiny heart beating, pink and fast. Buried deep within.

Squeezed tight and safe.

Curled up comfy, eating me.

A snack on the move.

“Could you push first for me please?”

Down.

Down.

Down.

What to eat. What to eat.

Saturday's breakfast menu includes: scrambled eggs with toast, scrambled egg sandwich, biscuit and gravy plate with a choice of side order, either bacon or sausage, egg and cheese biscuit.

Great.

I hate eggs.

May I have your attention, please. The Medical and Surgical Intensive Care units will now receive visitors until 12:45 p.m. Please limit visitation to two visitors at a time. Thank you.

Mary Jane caught Mrs. Fisher as she was heading out the door. She had to touch her arm to get her attention.

"Mrs. Fisher, could you hold on a minute please? They just called back from the unit and asked me to catch you."

"What's wrong?"

"Everything is okay with your husband. In fact they are in the process of moving him to room 2308 as we speak. They didn't want you going into an empty room and getting scared. Jill said she would call as soon as he is settled in, and I'll take you to the new room. It will be just about, oh, fifteen minutes or so."

"Thank you, Mary Jane. I will be waiting right here."

Mary Jane nodded and grinned, "I know."

Mrs. Zane Fisher went to the coffee station and poured another cup. She figured on at least a thirty-minute wait. That was plenty of time to drink a cup of decaf. Anytime the advocate said ten minutes it turned to twenty. A fifteen-minute wait was thirty and sometimes more like forty-five.

Mrs. Fisher sat in the empty waiting room and sipped slowly, relished the few minutes of calm. She fingered the edge of the Styrofoam cup between drinks. Her body relaxed as she breathed in and out deeply. She never had to go back in the awful room again. She hated the smell of bleach and infection. She hated the small, clear bag that lay on the edge of the bed. It was always half filled with urine. She could smell it through the plastic, strong and acidic. She tensed at the constant beeping. The tiny, blinking red lights that seemed to warn of death. She was glad to miss the visit. She was glad there would be no more machines. Just her and Bill. That is the way it had always been and that is the way it should be now. They started this fifty years ago as a pair. They should end it the same way.

Mrs. Fisher closed her eyes with the next drink and let memory wash over her. Her mind typed the images into words, phrases, paragraphs, as she recalled the past years. She drifted in and out of her own story, turning back to her favorite pages, her best stories rereading and reliving the best parts again.

She met Bill when she was young. She had been at her father's club. It was a social event, one of the few that the entire family could attend. A barbecue complete with roasted pig and fine ladies in large hats and lawn dresses. She had just turned twenty. Her dark hair fell about her shoulders in defiance of her mother. Her mother always wanted Zane's hair tucked away, under a hat, knotted with pins, or even cut short, as long as it wasn't just hanging there. Zane loved her hair down and was making that point clear to her mother when Bill walked around the corner.

He knew he had interrupted. Mother ran off in an elegant huff. Zane stood still simply staring. She would never forget that grin. The way he turned his head slightly to the left, looking over his shoulder to make sure no one else could hear. He took a lock of her hair in his hand and gently stroked it with the pad of his thumb, "I like it down, too." He smiled at her as he turned and walked away.

They were married sixteen months later. She was too busy to fuss about the wedding. Her mother had done it all. Zane had gone along with whatever she said, nodding her approval and thanking her father whenever the expense demanded it. She was finishing her last semester at school and seeing Bill as often as possible between writing jobs and her course work. All she wanted was to go with him and see the world.

She would sit in his lap and they would plan out the years together. A life filled with happiness and adventure. A life of daring deeds to look back on. A life completely filled.

Mrs. Fisher had been staring off into space for the last five minutes. Mary Jane piled the loose pages of the newspaper together as she looked at Mrs. Fisher. She had cleaned the phones, picked up the trash, and straightened the magazines while Mrs. Fisher just sat, still and relaxed, lost in a world of her own thoughts. Mary Jane had seen this before.

She is going back.

A better time.

A good day to get through this bad one.

They all find a memory and squeeze all the love out.

Holding on till it's empty.

Nothing there.

Barren.

Fried.

A memory burned and tarnished.

Old gold band.

Sitting out on the porch singing Randy Travis with Amy.

Sisters sing really deep.

Pretending.

‘Tend.

Please! Pleeaaaaazzzee! ‘Tend with me, sissy.

Her small voice coming through loud and clear.

Whining and embarrassing.

Play with me, sissy.

Play with me.

Mom brought her home and handed her to me.

Don’t touch her soft spot!

Watch out for the soft spot!

J.K. said it would make her brain leak out.

Ooze out like ketchup.

Kiss her gently on the cheek like a good sister.

Soft.

Clean.

Small.

Amy was the only one I knew.

Playing mermaids in the pool.

Singing loud with no one to hear.

No one would care.

We lived wild.

Mom was cooking beans.

Baked.

Brown.

Like little Indians running around in dirt stained t-shirts and cut off jeans.

Clean bodies smelling like the sun and the earth.

At night we'd live off ice tea and pop ice.

Ruby red lips making faces at blue mouths and green tongues.

Sticky bodies rushed in the tub.

Clothes piled knee deep in the laundry room.

Supper late.

Twilight.

The end of day.... the start of night.

Nite. Nite.

Nite. Nite.

Don't let

the

bed bugs

bite.

The hall way was almost empty. Only one man stood down the straight stretch. He was a tall elderly man wearing a hat and pacing slowly in front of the bathroom door, waiting. Mary Jane was marking the transfer sheet on her clip board as she walked.

Time?

13:15.

Date?

12/20.

Patient name?

William Fisher.

From?

SICU.

To?

2308.

Family informed?

Check.

Zane Fisher walked beside Mary Jane. Her arms were filled with the canvas bags of busy work that had helped time pass in the waiting room. Her step was weary. She shuffled, lagging behind Mary Jane's directed stride. Her limbs were waited down by dread. Alone with Bill. That is the way it should be. Together till death do us part. Alone in that sterile room. A fresh, new sanitized room. No machines, just Bill and me. Alone.

Zane had attended all the functions required of the wife of an up-and-coming business man. She dressed in pale blue suits and pulled her hair into a bun. Bill never asked her to do it, but she did to it make it easier for him. From across the crowded room he would gaze at her, bored with

the talk of production and finance. Zane could feel his look. She would lose track of the conversation. She felt his warm touch gently pulling the pins from her hair, pulling away the facade, the tension, the others that surrounded them. They were together, instantly, again.

Nothing had really changed even after John was born. Jonathon William Fisher. A big boy. Nine pounds, three ounces. August 21st, a Saturday. The only son of the youngest son. John was a quiet baby. He rarely cried. He seemed to make little change in their lives. He was an added bonus. A surprise that was welcomed. A part of the family but always his own man. To Zane he lived in photo albums.

Zane photographed his first steps, taken before he was a year old. They had been posing for pictures in the living room. He was trying to crawl under the coffee table. Zane photographed the whole process. One picture of him dipping his little head under the edge, testing for fit. The second of his diapered bottom wagging to the other end of the table. The third of his full body emerging from the table triumphant. The last of the young baby walking to his mother with a smile on his smudged face. Zane liked the last photo best. It only showed half his face, half his smile, and just a part of his walking legs and mobile feet. She had let the camera slip in surprise, in shock at her own son.

John had almost died when he was nine years old. Zane and Bill had sat with him for weeks as he battled with scarlet fever. He lay listless, still and sweaty. He needed no comfort. John fussed whenever they tried to read to him or tell him stories. Zane would bring in his food, on a tray, and he would muster the strength to eat. He would never let anyone feed him. He would slowly lift the spoon to his mouth, each bite a triumph of his will.

People called him an independent little cuss.

Zane called him every day for the first few weeks that Bill was sick. He told her to call his office at around nine each morning. She would call and quote the nurse or the doctor to him. He would ask questions and she would write them down on a sheet out of the spiral bound notebook he had brought her. The one time he visited was a Sunday. Bill had just been in a few days. John had brought a pack of black pens and three spiral bound notebooks. Written on the inside cover of each was his office number and the best time to call, 9:00 a.m. Zane brought him his coffee, black. He sat waiting, not watching the TV, not talking, not caring who Zane tried to introduce him to, not doing anything. Sitting in his own thoughts, in John's world.

He left about 7:00 p.m. that evening. He said he would call when he could make it back down.

So Zane was alone. Alone with Bill as it had always been. Leaning against the concrete walls without realizing it.

Mary Jane turned to speak with Mrs. Fisher and was surprised to see that she was not there. She had lost her about fifteen feet down the hall. The older lady was standing with her back against the wall, her totebags on the floor, her hands hanging empty at her side. Mary Jane rushed to her.

The advocate started to speak. Mary Jane knew a hundred phrases, familiar to her and deemed accurate to the situation. She couldn't get her mouth, her tongue, to form them. A garbled, questioning cough was the only sound she escaped from her. It was enough. Mrs. Fisher came back.

She didn't say a word. She looked up at Mary Jane as if she didn't want to recognize her. Then she slowly nodded, picked up her bags, and started walking down the hall to the new room.

Mary Jane stared at the shrinking figure as she also continued down the hall, this time not trying to keep a busy pace, just barely going forward, watching the retreating lady. She held tight to the clipboard. The metal started to make red indentions in her skin.

Mary Jane didn't know what to do.

Mrs. Zane Fisher was in the room for ten minutes when they all left. The RNs discussed Chinese restaurants while waiting for Dr. Sloan to come. One liked Hunan Park, the other Magic Wok. Dr. Sloan stayed only as long as needed. Just long enough to do the procedure.

She could hear the sound. She had watched with her hand clamped over her mouth. They had told Mrs. Fisher to leave the room. They had said she could go. She shook her head no and didn't move. She sat, staring, and listening, as they removed him from the machine.

The ripping swoosh of the tube coming out drowned the silence of the room. Mrs. Fisher waited. That should be the end. That sound, the noise, should take Bill away.

Instead he breathed.

Bill's chest filled with air and deflated. Once, twice, three times. Deep, heavy breaths gave way to a slower, steady intake. He was breathing on his own. She tried not to think about it. Dr. Sloan had told her this might happen.

"Now Mrs. Fisher, when the tube comes out, Bill will breathe on his own for a while. Usually it takes an hour or two for the lungs to grow weak. Slowly the lungs will give out and the heart will stop. We will make him comfortable. He will not be in any pain."

The gentle rise and fall seemed to her a miracle. She had not seen him breathe in a long time. When he was on the machine, air was pushed in his lungs and his body reacted to the invasion. Each breath was forced, mechanical. Now he was on his own and relief and ease seemed to wash over his whole body. The jerky, halting gasps were now the idle intakes of air

that she recognized. This was the rhythm she had slept with for years. It was familiar as her own name.

Zane still remembered the first night they had slept together. Her parents had invited Bill with them on vacation to the mountains. The North Carolina air was brisk and inviting. Zane's mom and dad had gone into Asheville to eat and visit old friends. Zane and Bill stayed in the cabin. He had built a fire and laid a quilt on the floor. It was romantic, passionate, sweet and exhausting. Bill fell asleep by her side.

Her long hair fell over her shoulder as she watched him breathe. She had fallen asleep with her cheek resting on his chest. Her body was lulled to rest by the intake of his breath. She listened to the loud thump of his heart as her eyes closed.

Mrs. Fisher opened her eyes when her husband shifted in the bed. His tall frame moved slightly to the left and then back to the right. He was trying to find the best position. The effort made his breath shallow. He rested again, this time facing her. She wanted to say something to him. She wanted to tell him she was sorry. She wanted to say that it was her fault. She wanted him to know a hundred things. She wanted him to open his eyes, grin, and tell her he understood. She wanted to laugh at something he said. She wanted to hear that voice. That voice that she held tight in her mind, not wanting to forget. She wanted that gravel that came into his words when he spoke softly. She just wanted him.

She reached out to touch his arm and then lightly stroked his hand. Instantly a bruise appeared. The blue mark continued to grow on the thin, lean hand. A pool of blood hardly contained by the paper skin. She couldn't stop. She couldn't let go. Her thumb moved across his skin as she watched his breathing become more hollow.

Mary Jane started to knock on the door but stopped when she saw the older lady sitting in the chair holding on to her husband. Tears streamed down Mrs. Fisher's face, catching and creating puddles in the deep wrinkles and laugh lines. Her mouth was slightly open and her head tilted back. She made no sound as her body swayed back and forth.

Mary Jane knew that Mr. Fisher was dead.

May I have your attention please? The medical and surgical intensive care units will visitors from now until 2:45 p.m. Please limit visitation to two visitors at a time. Thank You.

Print.

Print.

Print.

Okay.

Clip board clean?

Check.

New list made?

Check.

Conditions updated?

Check.

Criticals listed?

Check.

Surgeries updated?

Check.

Family cards updated?

Check.

Coffee fresh?

Check for regular.

Check for decaf.

Volunteer updated?

Check.

Clean out info cards?

Doing it as we speak, Captain.

Filing. Filing. Filing.

abcdefg,hijklmnop, qrrrr

Reed, Donald to 2202.

abcdefg, hijklmnop, qrsss.

Smith, Gladys to 6408.

abcdefgggggg

Guinn, Robert to 2311.

Expired?

Fisher, William to 2308. Exp. 14:00.

Fisher, William to 2308. Exp. 14:00.

Fisher, William to 2308. Exp. 14:00.

“Excuse me, Ma’am.”

Mary Jane turned. In her hand was the tattered card filled with names, dates, and phone numbers. The emergency details needed for a dying man. She had filled it out that first day. She had made the changes, one ICU bed to the next, through the surgeries, down the hall and now

gone. The advocates use red pens to mark the dead. Large felt-tip red, permanent letters.

Expired. Date. Time.

She looked up as she spoke.

“How can I help you, sir?”

“I need to see a patient in ICU.”

“Well, you got here just in time, sir. Visitation just started a few minutes ago. You still have about ten minutes left.” Mary Jane nodded, smiled and continued. “Did you need the room number?”

“He was in 2106, but I think he was moving so I’m not sure.”

Mary Jane did not look up from the clipboard.

“Name?”

“Bill Fisher. He is my father.”

This is Johnnnnn . . .

Mary Jane dropped the card onto the cold tile floor. She watched it, not bending to pick it up, not moving, not talking, just there.

The tall, middle-aged man bent to retrieve the information. He turned it over and read.

Expired.

3:23 p.m.

Keys.Keys.Keys.

Chapstick. Pens. Wallet. Checkbook. Compact. No Keys.

Change. Change. More Change.

Herrre weee gooo.

Keys.

Door Unlock.

Ready for ignition, Captain. Emergency brake off and clear for take off.

Destination?

A fine local eatery. Good food at good prices in an elegant downtown atmosphere. A brewery for William, soup and tea for me.

The Sophisticated Otter at 3:30.

He has to be at work at six.

I will have to tell him quick.

“Sweetheart, do you want the amber ale?”

“No, I have stopped drinking alcoholic beverages. Just tea for me, unsweet.”

“No need to be sarcastic. Amber it is.”

“I am being serious.”

“Why?”

“Because the surgeon general says it is bad for babies.”

Relax.

Relax.

Relax.

Take deep breaths.

Change music selection.

Jim Croce? No. Carol King? Maybe. Jimmy Buffet? Tried and true music of my late teen years. No. Ricky Nelson? The Best of?

Yeeessss, that is exceelllannt.

Beth and Amy will throw me a baby shower.

In June.

Hot sticky June in the back building of the local church banquet hall.

Pink streamers on the wall.

Balloons floating.

Banners waving victoriously.

Almost there Captain.

Time? 3:28.

Perfect.

Destination in sight, Captain.

Parking in front of building.

Not that busy. A slow day.

Let him relax. Have a beer.

Slip it into

the conversation

nice and

slow.

A baby.

A baby boy?

No.

No.

No son.

A girl.

Pink and yellow bedroom decorated with posters ripped out of teen magazines. Dusty unicorn collection on a wooden shelf. Closet full of jeans and sandals.

A girl.

There he is waiting in the car.

Unsuspecting fool.

Always a gentleman.

Opens doors daily.

Keys? Check.

Pocket book? Check.

Emergency brake on ? Check.

Here we go.

CHAPTER 4

THE OBEDIENT MAN

It was usually at least noon before they called. Mary Jane was in the kitchen sitting on the stool, her hands folding and unfolding, clenching and relaxing in rhythm. She looked at the phone through the doorway. To her it was like a photograph in a magazine—shiny, too focused, and centered on the carefully placed table. She could feel her legs tensing, preparing to move from the position they had been comfortable in all morning long. Mary Jane could feel the ring coming down the wire. Her heart had again started beating, slowly building up speed as the ringing came closer and closer. She could see the ring before she actually heard the sound. The waves crashed across her. The sound rippled through her causing the blood to come back into her face. The wait was over and she could move. She wiped her damp hands on her skirt before reaching for the receiver.

“ Hello.”

“ Hello, Mary Jane. This is Miss Kate. I guess you know why I’m calling.”

“ Is Sara sick again?”

“ As sick as she ever is. She just says she isn’t feeling well and she is crying to go home.”

“ Okay. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Thank you for calling me.”

“ Mary Jane?”

“ Yes ?”

“ This can’t go on forever. Something is going to have to give. This isn’t good for Sara or for you.”

“ I know. Nothing can go on forever.”

It was always the same way. It had been the same for the last four months. Every Tuesday and Thursday, Mary Jane would wake up early and start the ritual that would help Sara stay the whole day. The doctor had told her that routine would make all the difference to Sara. Routine would make it all better.

The information sheets were full of ideas. Ways to open the channel of communication. Ways to fill empty spaces. Ways to be two instead of one. Ways to be alone and be satisfied. Ways to get up in the morning and remember to shower.

Mary Jane had neatly taped the sheets to the refrigerator door. Every inch of available space was covered in black and white copies of the originals stored unused in a file cabinet, somewhere. Sometimes she would sit on the floor and look for more room. Her hands filled with tips and bad poetry, she trimmed down older sheets to make a space for the new.

She followed the directions to the letter. Mary Jane made special lunches packed with surprise treats and notes that told the small brown girl how much she was loved. Notes that said she was a good girl and that Mama was proud of her fine child. She formed, rather crafted, the lunches following all the bits of information. Sara’s sandwiches smiled at her. Raisin eyes and dried apricot lips creating funny faces through the plastic wrapper. Hidden in her brown bag was the combination for security to help her spend the day, to stay the full six hours away.

So far it had not worked.

Mary Jane was told that the lunches helped. Sara, on average, was spending more time at play. The other kids liked her better this way. They laughed at all the animal sounds she could make. She roared like a lion, mooed like a cow, who-hawed like a monkey, and squeaked like a dolphin, high pitched and shrill. She would spend the entire morning entertaining the others. Spend the whole of her morning speaking in beast talk, animal gibberish. The morning as a monkey and the afternoon with Mama. This was Sara's day.

Miss Kate said that lunch was the best time for Sara. At eleven o'clock she would pull that brown sack from her cubby and plunge her hand in deep, searching for the special treat. Her long legs carried her across the room to the snack table and she easily slid into her seat. Paint caked fingers unfolded the paper, and brown eyes recognized the large scrawl. Miss Kate said she had to read the note aloud before Sara would eat and then she would eat every crumb. Sometimes she even turned the bag upside down and shook it a few times to be sure it was empty.

After all the lunches were gone, Miss Kate had the children put their nap mats in rows. They would hear a story lying on their backs staring up at the glowing stars on the ceiling. Sara would watch the stars and listen to the fairy tales and when the others had drifted off to sleep, she would tell Miss Kate she was sick and ask to go home.

It had become the way of things.

Mary Jane carefully untied the apron strings that fell against the back of her skirt. The soft cotton pulled away easily. She folded the apron, laid it on the counter, and got the keys off the table. Sara expected her there about ten minutes after the call.

Mary Jane slid into the car, moved the seat forward, and put on her seat belt in one practiced, fluid motion. This too had become part of the routine. Ten minutes of solitude. Nothing to do. Just go from point A to point B. Time to think. Time to plan. Time to pass as she drove the right turns, waited for the two red lights, stopped and looked at the hospital. Time to wonder about not being there.

Driving was easy. Driving required an automatic skill. Her hands knew when to turn the wheel. Her foot knew to work the pedals to change gears. She could drive the car, and it was just like breathing. She rarely had to remind herself to breathe.

David came into her life and literally took her breath away. He was all she was not. He was a nice guy. He liked cats. He liked old movies. He liked to read. He was dependable. He laid his clothes out the night before and never missed a day of work. He always ate at the same time and always watched what he ate. He did whatever Mary Jane asked. After they were married, he continued to be a good man. He would work all day and come home, take a shower, and lie on the couch as Mary Jane fixed supper. He loved that couch. It was the idol he worshiped when he was not working. It was central to his life. Around it were all the tools that he needed to relax. The shelves on his side were lined with his favorite works of nonfiction. The cat's favorite spot was to his left. A tan pillow lay on the edge of the arm and that was his favorite place to close his eyes and think about how happy he was in his job, in his marriage, with his health, and with life in general.

When Sara was born something changed David's routine. Suddenly he was asked to do everything. He felt like a yo-yo yanked from the living room to the baby's room back and forth

a thousand times during the few evening hours he was home. The couch was getting worn from all the extra use.

David continued to be a nice guy. He was pleasant and patient and talked rarely. The commands he received changed as Sara grew older. He had gone from the diaper changer to the potty chair cleaner. He fetched crayons, rolled over, and even played dead as he was told.

At night he would go to bed and fall asleep instantly.

Mary Jane would sometimes stay awake and dream about her true love. Her day dreams would eventually turn to night dreams. She dreamed of the conversations at her baby shower.

Family friends and relatives had told her that he was a good man. He was kind to animals. He was a decent man. He was a moral man. He was a man who would do whatever was required.

Mary Jane never woke up feeling rested. She was always empty and awake.

The days at the hospital had scarred Mary Jane. Her skin grew thick with the long periods of unwashed body parts and her eyes glowed pink from the florescent lights. Her hair was long, untidy, and dry. She was bloated from all the waiting. The sitting shaped her. Her hips grew full and pear shaped, conformed to the line of the beige recliner. She looked worse than David had.

The nurses had been kind. They brought meals for Mary Jane during the day and a snack for Sara when she came to visit. They let Sara play with equipment she could reach and told her to sing to her daddy. He could hear her, they said.

Sara sang about Old MacDonald and life on the farm. She jumped on Mary Jane's lap and sang all the sounds she could make.

At night David's mother would come and take Mary Jane's place. With a mother's worried eyes, she would ask if anything had changed. She would question Mary Jane about the doctors. She would talk of miracles for thirty minutes while Mary Jane fell asleep standing against the wall.

She believed that Mary Jane didn't care. She believed that the situation was Mary Jane's fault.

Mary Jane pulled carefully into the parking space and grabbed her pocket book as she got out of the car. She knew that Sara would be waiting for her.

Miss Kate was waiting by the door holding Sara's hand.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't get here sooner. "

Miss Kate just shook her head as Sara leapt into Mary Jane's arms.

"Thank you, Kate. I know she had to be scared. I appreciate your help."

"Mary Jane, she needs to stay the whole time. This isn't good for her. "

"I'll talk to her. Sara, you'll do better tomorrow, right?"

Sara didn't answer her mother in words. Instead she made monkey sounds all the way to the car.

"Mary Jane, I need to talk to you. This can't continue. I've really let it go on too long as is. Under the circumstances I thought it would be okay the first few times, but it's been four months. This is unacceptable."

“I’ll do whatever I can to help Sara.”

“I think you both need professional help.”

“I don’t think we should talk about this in front of Sara.”

“Fine. But this is your last warning. Sara needs help that this school can not provide and you could use some, too. It is understandable considering everything.”

“Thank you for the advice. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Mary Jane, there is nothing wrong with asking for some help!”

“I know.”

Mary Jane checked to make sure Sara was in the booster seat, waved, and drove off as fast as she could go.

The car was filled with animal noises that Sara loved. Sara was asleep in the booster seat. Mary Jane had left the kiddy tape in the radio because it seemed to soothe Sara’s mood. She had been frightened because her mommy was late. Sara thought something bad had happened, like before.

Mary Jane tried to relax and just watch the familiar scenery. She wanted to forget those unrelenting thoughts that permeated her mind. Be careful what you wish for you just might get it. All those nights waiting. He is ten minutes late. What if something happened? Almost wanting something desperate and bad. Something that forces change. He was such a bad driver. His big personality flaw. So controlled except when behind the wheel. Surely it would be a car accident. A car hit him from the side? He always looked forward, never varied. So surely it would be a car wreck.

The only time he ever surprised me was the way he died.

He looked so small in the bed. Four weeks of I. V. fluids. He was swaddled in the covers like baby Jesus. Dr. Ward said it wouldn't be long now. His kidneys are gone. And his heart is going. Should be with in the next few hours. We made the right decision. He was really already gone. His mom cried gulping sobs and refused to be comforted. The plastic chair shook she cried so hard. His mom blames me still.

"If you knew he was throwing up you should have made him go to the doctor. You know that his sugar had to be high."

"I know. I tried. He said it was the flu. I swear I tried. He wouldn't go."

"You should have called us! You should have called an ambulance. You should have done something."

I know. I know. I know. I decided not to decide for a while. I didn't decide for three days. He seemed to be getting a little better. I was busy with Sara. He just lay on the couch and watched TV.

It was like it had always been.

We all found out huddled in a circle in the ER.

Four weeks of finding out, and when it is all over I run to pick up my baby at daycare. She had just finished eating lunch.

Sara leapt out of the open car door and ran to the jungle gym completely ignoring her mother's warning to slow down. Mary Jane watched the small girl climb up the slide and was glad that it was a slow day at the playground. No other kids to stop Sara from doing what she

wanted. No spying parents trying to make strained conversation. No one to ask why and how. No one to apologize as if it were their fault. As if they were God.

The last few days were the hardest. David was comatose. The doctors all wanted answers. David's mother wanted her way. Mary Jane needed hers.

His mother said that he would be against it. Their faith did not believe in it. It was murder.

His mother said that God makes miracles happen every day and David could be a miracle, too. It was too soon. The doctors just want the room. She didn't think they cared about her son. David was too still. The nurses said he was listening. They said he could hear. Mary Jane looked half-heartedly for signs that he understood the conversation. A movement of the hand. A twitch of the eye. A nod. David did nothing but lie there.

It was natural for Mary Jane to see David that way. He had spent hours that way every evening. He seemed content to be comatose.

Surrounding him were all his favorite things. Books lay scattered on the windowsill. Fresh flowers, bundles delivered since he was removed from the ICU, sat on the air conditioner vents. Pictures of his pets, drawn by Sara with her crayons, were taped all over the walls. The TV was above them droning ancient Tex Avery cartoons.

Mary Jane knew that David would lie there forever. He would watch a hospital drama on Thursday nights and say that he'd hate to live off machines, but Mary Jane knew this wasn't true. That was really his dark, deep fantasy. To lie perfect and undisturbed, everything and everyone focused on him. A room created so he could lie still and relax surrounded by all his things. Mary Jane knew it was time to let him decide on his own.

The machines came off on a Tuesday. It was a slow process. His mother prayed silently in her chair for hours. Her dry lips barely moving as she made promises to God to save his life.

David died as well as most. Mary Jane knew that for a few hours it would look as though he were breathing on his own. His chest sagged empty and full, empty and full, growing weaker with each breath. He wasn't as peaceful as Mary Jane thought he would be. He had to feel it. He had to know. He had to obey, once again, just out of habit. He had to know that it was up to her. Mary Jane was the one who had to decide.

Mary Jane wanted him to decide, but he refused.

Part of Mary Jane died with him. Her body slowly went numb as he breathed less and less. Her whole self was swollen too full with poison. She could hardly fit in the room. Her decision kept bumping into the walls and into the unplugged equipment, useless in the corner. She knew that Sara wanted to come by to see her daddy after preschool today. Sara had drawn him some green monkeys that she had seen on the Discovery Channel. Sara had begged to come to see him today. Mary Jane didn't think that Sara would fit. The room was just too small.

The funeral was another surprise to Mary Jane. She had no idea David knew so many people. The seats were full and some of the men were standing. David's mother sat still and black, sedated. His father stood beside her chair, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. Occasionally she would close her eyes, as if to recall a better day.

Mary Jane stood in her new black dress, uncomfortable and hot. She was too near David who was prostrate near her as usual.

People Mary Jane didn't know kept coming over to her, shaking hands and saying what a great guy David had been. If she needed anything to let them know. They were sorry. She just stood still, smiled, and shook hands.

The park bench was particularly uncomfortable today. The painted green slats cut into Mary Jane's back creating stripes of irritation. She was heavier today. Her normal physical weight had become more burdensome in the past few months. She hadn't gained weight. The scales read the same. Her clothes fit as usual. She looked the same, except perhaps a little more sluggish than average.

Mary Jane thought that her muscles had stopped working. She was unable to move as before. Her body, the shell that hid her, was too heavy now. It took more effort each day to do the smallest thing. After dinner, at night when Sara was in bed, she would sink into the arm chair to read. Sometimes she had to spend the entire night in that chair because she didn't have the strength to pull herself free from the binding fake leather. She had no lift. Her bones had disappeared. She had lost her support system.

She tried to adjust herself on the bench and found that once again her movement was limited. Her hips shrugged a bit to the side and the bench was now eating away at some fresh skin. Sara still screamed from the monkey bars making absurd sounds as she jumped from bar to bar, swinging through the jungle with determination. Her body was filled with animal instincts. Sara had no problem with movement. Her body was driven to constant motion. Mary Jane often feared that Sara would never stop.

Sara stopped making the beast sounds when her body hit the blades of thick green grass. Mary Jane saw the fall before she heard the thud that accompanied it. The thud now filled her ears, her brain, a dull sound even slower than David's death. She couldn't feel her heartbeat as she looked at her daughter's crumpled form. She tried to rise from the bench, but her body refused. Her blood seemed to be pooled into the center of her chest. The blood wouldn't flow into her heart, into her limbs. It had turned into a thick jelly that she couldn't push through. Her mouth was open slightly and she wanted to cry for help. Only choking sounds came from her mouth.

Sara was still on the ground not moving. Even from the bench Mary Jane could see the odd position that she was in. Her arm was bent backward in an unnatural, grotesque angle. Her face was turned away from her mother. She wondered if maybe Sara knew, maybe she blamed her, too. She couldn't see whether Sara's eyes were open. She couldn't see the small child's thoughts.

Mary Jane again tried to scream but found that she had no sound within her reach. Her mind was thick with possible solutions and she was wading through them slowly, like walking through deep mud. She was taking those thick strides when she heard the sound. It was echoing through the mud and jelly, reverberating through all her empty chambers.

Sara was crying. Sara was whimpering out a single revitalizing word—Mom.

The word was filled with a thousand different emotions. Need, strength, fear and faith surrounded the weak sound of the single cry. Sara, in pain, scared, and in shock only needed one thing. She needed Mom.

Mary Jane was set free and more sudden than even a slow death can be, she found herself by her daughter's side treating her damaged limbs with confident care.

On Thursday she did not wait by the phone.

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